

Intelligence Support

Into Politics With John F. Kennedy

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*Editor's Note: This article is drawn from**the CIA's history of an historical study*

(b)(3)(c) entitled *Getting To Know the President: CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates From 1952 to 1992.*

The CIA's early relationship with presidential candidate John Kennedy could hardly have been more different from the one it had established eight years earlier with Dwight Eisenhower. In 1952, the Agency's briefings in the pre-election period had been undertaken by working-level officials who, for the most part, delivered current intelligence summaries in written form. With few exceptions, the material had stayed away from policy issues. In 1960, by contrast, the briefings were handled personally by the Director of Central Intelligence, Allen Dulles, and included extended discussions of sensitive matters.

In 1960, the CIA and its programs for the first time became involved in the political campaign, sometimes within public view and sometimes behind the scenes. Issues arose relating to the need for, and the protection of, the US Government's intelligence capabilities, specific intelligence collection programs such as the U-2 aircraft overflights, and substantive analytic findings related to Soviet economic and strategic capabilities. Charges were made regarding the allegedly selective use of intelligence information by the White House and the Agency, and CIA for the first time faced the question of what obligation it might have to brief a presidential candidate on a major covert action program.

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The Presidential Debates

Many of these issues were on display during the presidential debates, held for the first time in 1960. During the first debate in Chicago on 26 September, the focus was exclusively on domestic issues. In the second debate on 7 October in Washington, the candidates quickly became enmeshed in a discussion of Kennedy's earlier statement that the United States should have apologized to the Soviets for the incident in which Francis Gary Powers's U-2 was downed over Russia. In attacking Kennedy, Vice President Richard Nixon said, "We all remember Pearl Harbor. We lost 3,000 American lives. We cannot afford an intelligence gap. And I just want to make my position absolutely clear with regard to getting intelligence information. I don't intend to see to it that the United States is ever in a position where, while we are negotiating with the Soviet Union, that we discontinue our intelligence effort, and I don't intend ever to express regrets to Mr. Khrushchev or anybody else...."¹

From the point of view of intelligence analysts, the third debate on 13 October, featuring Kennedy from New York and Nixon from Los Angeles, was of interest because Kennedy cited the DCI regarding one way in which the Soviets were catching up with the United States: "The economic growth of the Soviet Union is greater than ours. Mr. Dulles has suggested it is from two to three times as great as ours."² In that debate and in the fourth and

final encounter in New York on 21 October, Kennedy pursued the theme of the Soviets surpassing the United States economically and militarily.

Perhaps the most memorable issue raised in the 1960 debates—one with an obvious intelligence angle—was the alleged missile gap. Kennedy charged that the Soviets had “made a breakthrough in missiles, and by 1961, 1962, and 1963 they will be outnumbering us in missiles. I’m not as confident as he [Nixon] is that we will be the strongest military power by 1963.” Kennedy added, “I believe the Soviet Union is first in outer space. We have made more shots but the size of their rocket thrust and all the rest. You yourself said to Khrushchev, you may be ahead of us in rocket thrust but we’re ahead of you in color television, in your famous discussion in the kitchen. I think that color television is not as important as rocket thrust.”³

During three of the debates, Nixon attacked Kennedy for his lack of willingness to defend Quemoy and Matsu, the small islands off China. The extensive discussion of the Quemoy-Matsu issue did not create any direct problem for the CIA, but indirectly it caused a great commotion regarding Cuba that involved both candidates, the White House, and the Agency.

Kennedy adviser Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., later described the relationship of these China and Cuba issues and the sequence of events in *A Thousand Days*. He wrote, “The Kennedy staff, seeking to take the offensive after his supposed soft position on Quemoy and Matsu, put out the provocative

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statement about strengthening the Cuban fighters for freedom.”⁴ The controversial press release, crafted late one evening in the Biltmore Hotel in New York City by speechwriter Richard Goodwin, said, “We must attempt to strengthen the non-Batista, democratic, anti-Castro forces in exile, and in Cuba itself, who offer eventual hope of overthrowing Castro.” According to Goodwin, the policy statement was not shown to the sleeping Kennedy because of the late hour; it was the only public statement of the campaign not approved by the candidate.⁵

The ill-considered statement on Cuba received wide press play and was immediately attacked. *The New York Times* the next day ran the story as the lead item on the front page with the headline: “Kennedy Asks Aid for Cuban Rebels To Defeat Castro, Urges Support of Exiles and Fighters for Freedom.” James Reston wrote in the *Times* that “Senator Kennedy [has] made what is probably his worst blunder of the campaign.”⁶

Coming the day before the fourth presidential debate, the statement from the Kennedy camp put Nixon in what he found to be an extraordinarily awkward position. Many years later Nixon wrote in his memoirs, “I knew that Kennedy had received a CIA briefing on the administration’s Cuba policy and assumed that he knew, as I did, that a plan to aid the Cuban exiles was already under way on a top secret basis. His statement jeopardized the project, which could succeed only if it were supported and implemented secretly.”⁷

Throughout the campaign the two candidates had engaged in a spirited exchange about whether the Eisenhower administration had “lost” Cuba, and Nixon knew that the issue would be revived in the final debate, which was to be devoted solely to foreign affairs. Nixon has written that, in order to protect the security of the planned operation, he “had no choice but to take a completely opposite stand and attack Kennedy’s advocacy of open intervention.” And he did attack, saying, “I think that Senator Kennedy’s policies and recommendations for the handling of the Castro regime are probably the most dangerously irresponsible recommendations that he has made during the course of this campaign.”⁸

Former Kennedy advisers have underscored over the years that the statement on Cuba was released without Kennedy’s knowledge by staffers ignorant of the covert action planning under way at the time and was crafted solely to ensure that Kennedy would not again be put on the defensive about Communist expansionism. These same advisers differ among themselves, however,

on the key question of whether Kennedy himself knew of the covert action plans. Kennedy speechwriter Theodore Sorensen said in 1993, "I am certain that at the time of the debates Kennedy had no knowledge of the planned operation. His reference to more assertive action regarding Cuba was put in by one of my assistants to give him something to say."⁹

The assistant was Richard Goodwin, and his memory is quite different. Goodwin asserts that, "As a presidential candidate, he [Kennedy] had received secret briefings by the CIA, some of which revealed that we were training a force of Cuban exiles for a possible invasion of the Cuban mainland."¹⁰ Goodwin and Sorensen have both made clear that they did not attend any CIA briefings.

The US Government's planning for a covert action program intended to undermine Castro had been approved by President Eisenhower in March of 1960 and was in progress throughout the period of the presidential campaign. The question of when and to what extent Kennedy—or any presidential candidate—would be informed was important to CIA because it raised the delicate question of informing individuals outside the normally small restricted circle in CIA, the Congress, and the executive branch of ongoing covert action deliberations.

In 1960 this was uncharted territory. Subsequently, the Agency's practice came to be one of delaying briefings even on established covert action programs, as well as on sensitive technical and human source collection programs, until after the

election, when it would be clear who would be president. This meant denying such briefings to presidential candidates, creating the obvious risk that they would inadvertently make statements during the campaign that would embarrass themselves and the Agency, or—more important—complicate the future execution of a US foreign policy.

The outgoing Eisenhower administration was fully aware that covert action planning on Cuba was a political bombshell well before the matter came to a head in October. Following one of Allen Dulles's briefings of the National Security Council in early August, for example, the Vice President pulled the DCI aside to ask him whether Kennedy and his running mate, Senator Lyndon Johnson, were being provided information on covert action, specifically that related to Cuba. Dulles gave a carefully crafted answer to the effect that Kennedy was being told a little but not too much. According to former Agency officials familiar with the exchange, Nixon reacted strongly to Dulles's reply, saying, "Don't tell him anything. That could be dangerous."¹¹

In his own account of these events, published in 1962, Nixon charged that Kennedy, prior to the election of 1960, had knowledge of covert action planning "for the eventual purpose of supporting an invasion of Cuba itself."¹² This charge prompted a formal press release from the White House on 20 March 1962 denying that Kennedy had been told of any plans for "supporting an invasion of Cuba" before the election. The White House denial was supported

by Dulles, by then a former DCI, who explained that Nixon's comments were apparently based on a misunderstanding of what was included in the briefings he had given Kennedy.

Pre-Election Briefings

As early as 30 March 1960, Edward P. Morgan of the American Broadcasting Company used the occasion of a presidential press conference to ask Eisenhower if the presidential nominees to be selected in the summer would be given high-level intelligence briefings. At that early date the DCI had not yet raised the subject with the President, but Eisenhower did not hesitate, saying, "We always do that. They did it for me in 1952 and I did it in 1956, as quick as the nominees are named they begin to get it."¹³ Indeed, on 18 July, Eisenhower sent telegrams to the Democratic nominees offering them briefings by the CIA. Undoubtedly recalling his own difficult exchange with President Truman eight years earlier, Eisenhower included in his telegram a paragraph saying, "Because of the secret character of the information that would be furnished you, it would be exclusively for your personal knowledge. Otherwise, however, the receipt of such information would impose no restriction on full and free discussion."¹⁴

Senator John F. Kennedy, the Democratic presidential nominee, immediately accepted the offer, and the first intelligence briefing was held five days later, on Saturday, 23 July. The briefing of Kennedy was held at his vacation home in

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Hyannisport, Massachusetts, and was conducted by the DCI alone in a session that lasted approximately two and a quarter hours. Senator Lyndon Johnson, as vice presidential nominee, was briefed at his ranch in Texas on 28 July, also by Dulles.

In that first round of briefings the DCI put heavy emphasis on Soviet issues, including Soviet progress in strategic delivery capabilities, missiles, and bombers, and discussed the nuclear testing issue. He also reviewed Soviet statements on Berlin and Sino-Soviet cooperation. Dulles went over the latest intelligence on the Formosa-China situation; Middle East politics, including events in Iran and regarding the French problem in Algeria; the crisis in the Congo; and Cuba. The briefing of Johnson differed from that of Kennedy only because Johnson was also interested in discussing Mexico.¹⁵

Dulles recorded that both were interested in developments that might arise during the campaign, especially in Berlin, Cuba, and the Congo. Kennedy asked Dulles's opinion about the likelihood of an early Chinese attack on the offshore islands in the Taiwan Straits and inquired about the status of the nuclear testing conference. Johnson, in addition to his interest in Mexican and Caribbean matters, asked about Soviet missile developments, reflecting his position as Chairman of the Senate Preparedness Committee.

At the conclusion of the first briefing, Kennedy stated that in subsequent briefings he wanted to have worldwide wrap-ups, but, as a result of scheduling difficulties, the

second and only other pre-election session was delayed almost two months. To his surprise, Dulles received a telephone call from a member of the Kennedy staff about 9 p.m. on Saturday night, 17 September, while dining with friends in Georgetown. The DCI was asked if he could meet with the Senator on Monday morning, 19 September, at the Kennedy home in Georgetown.¹⁶

When the DCI arrived for the hastily arranged briefing, he found Kennedy in a series of discussions with Senator Albert Gore, Sr., and various other people, including Prince Sadruddin Khan, uncle of the Aga Khan. After the other visitors departed, the DCI had approximately 30 minutes with Kennedy to give him an update on world trouble spots. Dulles's memorandum for the record notes that the two discussed Cuba, the Congo, Berlin, Laos, Jordan, Syria, the Sino-Soviet dispute, and the Soviet space program.

During the second briefing, Kennedy was interested in learning what Khrushchev's objectives would be in his coming visit to the UN and what the Agency believed the Soviet leader was likely to say or do. In addition, the Senator wanted to be alerted to any critical areas that CIA thought might blow up over the next six or seven weeks before the election.

Dulles apparently took no specific action at the time in response to this latter request.

More than a month later, with the election looming, Robert Kennedy contacted Acting DCI Gen. Charles Cabell to repeat the request for information on possible trouble spots. This led to a response within 24 hours. On 2 November, Cabell personally traveled to California, where Kennedy was campaigning, to deliver a memorandum that discussed a number of possible crisis areas. These included the Soviets' October Revolution anniversary, Sino-Soviet developments, tensions in Berlin and the Taiwan Straits, possible Chinese nuclear tests, a Soviet space spectacular, the French-Algerian impasse, events in Southeast Asia, King Hussein's delicate position in the Middle East, the unsettled situation in the Congo, and possible action by Cuba against Guantanamo Naval Base. In this review, the Agency cautioned that in fact "we do not estimate any of them are likely to occur prior to 8 November."¹⁷

Available CIA records do not confirm that Dulles briefed Kennedy on the status of Cuban covert action planning in either of the two sessions held before the 1960 election. In fact, the DCI's memorandums for the record regarding the sessions in July and September mention Cuba only as one of many trouble spots around the world. Taken alone, this would suggest that their discussion concerned what was going on in Cuba rather than what the United States was planning to do about it.

One internal CIA memorandum of 15 November 1960 discussing an

anticipated postelection briefing mentions that "The following draft material is much more detailed and operational than that prepared for the candidates in July."¹⁸ This formulation suggests that the message on Cuba Dulles conveyed in July was at least a bit "operational," even if not detailed. Such an inference would be consistent with Dulles's answer to Nixon's question in early August that he had told Kennedy, in effect, a little but not too much.

When Dulles met with Kennedy in July (their only meeting before the exchange between Dulles and Nixon in early August), the planning on Cuba and the limited operational activities that were under way related almost wholly to propaganda and political action. The paramilitary planning at that point envisaged the deployment of extremely small, two- or three-man guerrilla units. Contingency planning within the Agency for more forceful action intensified over the next several months, but the idea of a conventional assault by Cuban exile forces was not put before the interagency Special Group until 3 November. At that time, it was rejected.

The Missile Gap

In the two pre-election briefings in 1960, the most challenging issue the DCI is known to have discussed at length was that of growing Soviet strategic capabilities. Without intending to do so, Dulles had created a considerable political problem for himself by giving a number of public speeches drawing attention to growing Soviet capabilities and the question of what the US response

ought to be. He had highlighted the USSR's progress in basic science, training large numbers of scientists, and research and development efforts as well as its obvious achievements in building spacecraft and missiles.

In early 1960 the United States was aware of Soviet missile tests from Tyuratam but did not know if any Soviet missiles had been deployed. In the search for deployed missiles, among other priority missions, U-2 aircraft had been flown over the Soviet union since July 1956. On 1 May 1960, Gary Powers was shot down. In the United States, the West Virginia primary election campaign was at its peak; there was no doubt that the U-2 incident would figure in the impending general election campaign.

In his formal memorandums for the record, Dulles did not provide much detail regarding exchanges he may have had with Kennedy about the U-2 incident. He did note that the Senator, in the September briefing, had asked him about a book by Maj. Gen. John Medaris, entitled *Countdown for Decision*. The book had criticized the US Government for its failure to have replaced the U-2 with a more sophisticated aircraft or satellite reconnaissance system that would not have been vulnerable.

In a memorandum sent on 25 September to Gen. Andrew Goodpastor, the staff secretary of the White House, Dulles recorded that both Kennedy and Johnson had separately inquired about intelligence techniques or capabilities to replace the U-2.¹⁹ For security reasons, Dulles was clearly uneasy about these questions and noted that he had replied

only in a general way, indicating that research and development work on advanced aircraft and satellites was progressing "with reasonably satisfactory prospects." Dulles added, "Unless I hear from you to the contrary, I shall not give any more detailed briefings on this subject." In fact, the first US satellite reconnaissance system was being used in an experimental way in the late summer of 1960; launch had occurred in August. Analysis of the imagery that was acquired—buttressed by other intelligence reporting—began to indicate the extent (or lack of it) of Soviet deployments in December 1960, just after the election.

During the pre-election period, Dulles was also in an awkward position owing to a minor dispute or misunderstanding between the White House and the Kennedy team about whether the Senator should receive a briefing from Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates. In the interest of fairness to each candidate, Eisenhower wanted Kennedy to receive general overview briefings on the world situation from the CIA, and these were being provided. On the other hand, the President initially declined the Kennedy team's request that he receive a briefing from the Secretary of Defense. By the end of August, however, the White House had changed its mind and approved a briefing by Gates.

Dulles had weighed in with the White House on at least two occasions, including once with Eisenhower personally, to urge that Gates brief Kennedy. The DCI knew that he would be courting political trouble if he answered what had been Kennedy's first question: "Where do

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we ourselves stand in the missile race?” As he had done on innumerable occasions in Congressional appearances, Dulles insisted that the Defense Department “was the competent authority on this question.”

The White House was uneasy that Kennedy would hear several versions of the story concerning Soviet strategic capabilities. Democrats on the Preparedness Committee, led by the uniquely well-informed Senator Stuart Symington, were attacking the White House by claiming the Soviets were outdistancing the United States. Gates had been trying to play down the issue, but the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Air Force Gen. Nathan Twining, was espousing the more alarmist views of the Air Force. As DCI, Dulles had been charged with pulling together a collective view of this intractable collection and analytic problem, but everyone, including Eisenhower, knew the Agency did not have the firm intelligence information or bureaucratic clout to do so.²⁰

In responding to Kennedy's questions about Soviet strategic capabilities, Dulles did not improvise. On this critical and technical subject he stuck very closely to the findings laid out in numerous National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs). From 1957 to 1960, the Intelligence Community published from two to four NIEs annually evaluating Soviet progress on space and ballistic missile programs. In December 1957 the Community had published one of its most ominous Estimates, referring to the Soviets' “crash program.” That Estimate had projected that the USSR sometime during calendar year 1959 would

probably have its first operational capability with 10 prototype ICBMs.²¹ The same Estimate projected that the Soviet Union probably would have “an operational capability with 100 ICBMs about one year after its first operational capability date, and with 500 ICBMs two, or at most, three years (i.e., 1963) after first operational capability date.”

By early 1960, the Community as a whole was using somewhat more moderate language to discuss likely Soviet missile capabilities, but nevertheless it published early that year three separate Estimates whose findings were sufficiently alarmist to fuel the missile gap debate. The bottom line of an Estimate published in February was especially important because it came as close as the US Intelligence Community ever did to a net assessment. The Estimate stated, “Our analysis leads us to believe that, if the US military posture develops as presently planned, the USSR will in 1961 have its most favorable opportunity to gain a decided military, political, and psychological advantage over the United States by the rapid deployment of operational ICBMs.”²² The February Estimate went on to observe that the Soviet ICBM program did not appear to be a crash program but was designed to provide a substantial ICBM capability at an early date. A

separate Estimate, also published in February, stated flatly: “The single-most important development affecting the structure of Soviet military power during the period of this estimate will be the buildup of an ICBM force. Long-range missiles will enable the USSR to overcome its inferiority to the US in nuclear strategic attack capability, as it was unable to do with bomber aircraft.”²³

In terms of the political debate on the issue, an even larger problem was posed by the Air Force conclusion that leaders of the Soviet union were endeavoring to attain a decisive military superiority over the United States. This superiority, the Air Force assessed, would enable the USSR “to launch such devastating attacks against the US that at the cost of acceptable levels of damage to themselves, the United States as a world power would cease to exist.” This ominous Air Force view was repeated in several Estimates published during the period. It was shared widely with the Congress and leaked to the press.

The findings of these Estimates were having a significant impact on the White House, the Congress, and the voters. In the words of Howard Stortz, a senior CIA officer who often accompanied Dulles to his briefings of the Congress and the NSC, “Our findings were sufficiently scary that those who wanted a new administration to be elected were finding support in our Estimates.”²⁴

One interesting index of the impact of this intelligence was provided by former President Gerald Ford in September 1993. Responding to an open-ended question about whether

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he remembered occasions when intelligence findings had created particular policy dilemmas, Ford volunteered, “Mostly I remember the period from 1953 to 1964, when I was on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee that provided the CIA's budget. Allen Dulles and others from the CIA would come in and paint the most scary picture possible about what the Soviet Union would do to us. We were going to be second rate; the Soviets were going to be Number One. I didn't believe all that propaganda.”²⁵

The same material that was briefed to the House was provided to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and, therefore, to one of its most prominent junior members, John Kennedy. Kennedy made effective use of this intelligence in the campaign to the discomfort of the CIA, the White House, and Vice President Nixon, the Republican candidate. Goodpaster remembers that the politics of the issue became sufficiently awkward that Eisenhower sent him to the Agency to meet personally with Dulles and Symington to get to the bottom of the problem. Stoertz remembers well that “Allen Dulles had us prepare a chart to prove we had not cooked the books for the election.”

Postelection Briefing on Cuba

Once Kennedy had won the election, CIA felt free to provide him a systematic briefing on the Agency's covert action programs worldwide, and—most important—to inform him in detail about the deliberations under way on Cuba. This took place at the Kennedy residence in Palm Beach,

Florida, on 18 November, some 10 days after the vote. Reflecting the importance and sensitivity of the subject, there were two high-level briefers: Dulles, whom, along with J. Edgar Hoover, Kennedy had announced he would keep on as DCI the day following the election (his first appointments); and Richard Bissell, the Agency's Deputy Director for Plans (operations). Like Dulles, Bissell knew Kennedy from the Washington social scene and, in his own case, from a shared New England background.

In discussing the briefing more than 30 years later, Bissell recalled that “Allen and I felt great pressure to inform the new President. The [Cuba] operation had acquired a considerable momentum and could not just be turned off and on. We settled outside on the terrace at a table, and I gave him an abbreviated but fairly complete briefing on the state of the operation. I went on at least 30 minutes, maybe 45. I was fairly detailed in outlining the plan of what we hoped would happen.”²⁶

A review of the briefing papers used by Dulles and Bissell suggests that they give Kennedy a careful overview

of the Cuba plans as they existed in mid-November 1960. Their review included an explanation of the Presidential authorization for the Agency to undertake planning that Eisenhower had signed on 17 March. The briefing described the political action initiatives already under way in which the Agency was providing support to various anti-Castro groups and individuals inside and outside Cuba. They described the propaganda operation in place at the time, including the preparation of publications and ongoing radio broadcasts aimed at weakening Castro's rule. The latter included broadcasts from Swan Island, which years later came to play a prominent role in the Agency's activities directed against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The briefing of 18 November occurred in the midst of a fundamental review, in Washington, of the scope of the paramilitary aspects of the anti-Castro program. At that time, everything was in flux. Nothing had been decided, let alone finally approved. In these circumstances, Dulles and Bissell planned to brief Kennedy carefully on a range of possible paramilitary operations. The first option envisaged the development and support of dissident groups by the Agency's Cuban assets to undertake guerrilla action against the regime within Cuba. A group of instructors had been trained who would, in time, oversee the instruction of up to 500 additional men. The two briefers were to describe the radio and flight training being provided Cuban pilots. The role of a few small groups recently placed inside Cuba and the airdrops of supplies and equipment that had been

Kennedy

made and were planned also were to be discussed.

The second potential phase of the paramilitary plan was a combined sea-air assault by the trained Cuban exiles. The assault would be coordinated with the general guerrilla activity. This undertaking would attempt to establish a close-in staging base for future operations. A last phase, should it be needed, would be an air assault on the Havana area with guerrilla forces in Cuba moving on the ground into the capital area. mention was to be made of a contingency plan for overt US military intervention which would include the use of Agency assets.

Bissell remembers emphasizing particularly the plans for the possible movement of exile ground and air forces to Cuba both by sea and by air. He recalls that he "put a lot of emphasis on the timing aspects, and the numbers [of men and equipment] involved." Dulles and Bissell intended to inform Kennedy that it did not appear that guerrilla actions alone would be successful in sparking a successful revolt against the regime. It is unclear whether they intended to brief the President-elect of the even more downbeat assessment expressed by some in the Agency by mid-November that even an invading force of exile Cubans would be unsuccessful without direct US involvement.

Press accounts of the briefing of Kennedy in Palm Beach indicate that it went on for two hours and 40 minutes. Bissell remembers that throughout the extended session the President-elect "was almost entirely a listener—although a very good

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listener. Kennedy had a number of questions that grew out of the briefing, but he had no prepared list of questions ahead of time."

Available CIA records do not suggest that Kennedy volunteered any opinion regarding the wisdom, or lack thereof, of the plans presented to him. Nothing in the documentation suggests that he either authorized the operation or urged restraint. To the contrary, Dulles stated in a memorandum sent to Gen. Maxwell Taylor, the President's Special Adviser on Military Affairs, on 1 June 1961 that "the purpose of the briefing was not to solicit the President-elect's approval or disapproval of the program but merely to acquaint him of its existence."²⁷ This implies that Dulles had not previously informed Kennedy of the plans.

As Bissell put it, "We were in an absolutely untenable position until the new President knew what was going on, but we avoided seeking a yea or nay." He added that "Kennedy was favorably interested, but extremely careful to avoid a commitment, express or implied. We didn't get any negative reaction—I was interested above all in his studious neutrality. Allen Dulles and I talked about the Kennedy reaction after the fact. We had the same impression—on the whole Kennedy's attitude was favorable."

This shared impression cleared the way for continued Agency planning for what ultimately became the Bay of Pigs operation.

Other Covert Programs

Dulles intended to have the briefing of the President-elect in Palm Beach cover worldwide intelligence operations, of which Cuba was only one. His records indicate he wanted to establish that the Agency was fully supportive of the new President. "We made it clear to him that from this time on any information he desired was at his immediate disposal and would be willingly given."²⁸ In fact, Dulles was also working hard to solidify his personal standing with Kennedy. Senior Agency officers undoubtedly had mixed feelings when Dulles announced at a special staff meeting on 10 November that "all liaison with the new administration by CIA would be conducted by the Director."²⁹

According to handwritten notes prepared by Bissell, he and Dulles also were prepared to brief Kennedy on a variety of issues, large and small.³⁰ For example, one planned topic was the question of clearances. While the President would be told that he possessed all clearances automatically, he should be advised of what was involved in providing special compartmented clearances that would enable his staff to receive intercepted communications and other sensitive material. Dulles also intended to discuss with Kennedy the legal basis for CIA's worldwide special operations. On the substantive side, in addition to Cuba, Dulles was prepared to brief Kennedy on operations in

Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere in Central America. Agency activities in Tibet were also a discrete agenda item.

The majority of the items to be raised did not address specific countries or regions. Rather, Dulles planned a thematic discussion of Agency propaganda and political action programs, with illustrative successes from around the world. Dulles was primed to provide examples of where the Agency had succeeded in reducing the power of Communist parties abroad and in supporting the growth of constructive opposition parties. In a review of what was, at that time, still recent history, Dulles intended to inform Kennedy of CIA actions related to coups in Guatemala, Laos, and South Vietnam.

Regarding technical collection, Dulles was undoubtedly relieved to be able to discuss with Kennedy more fully the progress that had been made with aircraft and satellite systems to replace the U-2. The DCI's notes suggest he intended to discuss the existing U-2 program and two follow-on programs. One was the SR-71 aircraft, then under development, and the other the first imaging satellite, a film-return system.

Thirty years after the fact, there is no way to know with certainty how much of the material Dulles and Bissell prepared was actually discussed with Kennedy. Bissell remembers that the bulk of the time he and Dulles spent with Kennedy in Palm Beach was used to discuss Cuba. After that discussion, Bissell remembers that "Allen Dulles and John Kennedy drifted off to the end of the terrace and talked for some time

about matters having nothing to do with Cuba." Bissell recalls that their conversation lasted at least 15 but certainly no more than 30 minutes. When shown several pages of his own handwritten notes concerning the issues the two had intended to raise, Bissell laughed and asserted that, "Nobody had time to cover everything that is on this list at any time prior to inauguration."

Records of the Eisenhower White House suggest that Dulles discussed, or at least was authorized to discuss, only a narrow agenda with the President-elect at the Palm Beach meeting. On 17 November, the day before Dulles traveled to Florida, Goodpaster recorded that he had informed the President that he had discussed the agenda with the CIA Director and with Gen. Wilton Persons, the White House Chief of Staff. Goodpaster had informed Dulles that CIA operations were to be disclosed to Kennedy only as specifically approved on a case-by-case basis by President Eisenhower. Goodpaster's memorandum confirms Eisenhower had approved Dulles's plan to inform Kennedy of operations relating to Cuba as well as to "certain reconnaissance satellite operations of a covert nature." No other subjects were specifically approved.³¹

Dulles's notes state not only that Eisenhower authorized the Palm Beach briefing but also that the briefing was given at his suggestion and that it covered "worldwide intelligence operations." Bissell recalls that the scheduling of the briefing came up rather quickly. To his knowledge, Dulles received no guidance or suggestion from the White House on what the subject matter should be.

In discussing the politics of these briefings in 1993, Goodpaster remembered clearly the conflicting views the President and others in the White House had about them. On one hand, some of Eisenhower's pre-election reservations had evaporated by mid-November. He had issued a directive that, because Kennedy was to be the next president, "We must help him in any way we can." On the other hand, Goodpaster also remembers that Eisenhower had some uneasiness about how far Dulles should and would go in his discussions. The President believed ongoing deliberations involving him and his advisers should remain confidential, and worried about the inherent problems of protecting that confidentiality while at the same time briefing Kennedy fully.

Goodpaster's records indicate he discussed with the President and Senior Staff Assistant Gordon Gray the "special problem" of Dulles's continued attendance at NSC meetings, once he had been designated by Kennedy to serve in the next administration. Goodpaster informed Dulles that, while the President wanted him to continue to attend NSC meetings, the proceedings of those sessions were not to be disclosed outside the NSC room. According to the records, he had the impression "Mr. Dulles had not understood that this matter was a delicate one." In 1993 Goodpaster reiterated that "There was a feeling that all this had to be explained pretty carefully to Allen Dulles."

The Mystery Briefing of Late November

A number of books and articles written about the Bay of Pigs contain the assertion that Kennedy was informed in detail of the planned operation and gave his approval in a briefing by Dulles in late November 1960. A review of the chronology of these publications suggests that most authors picked up this piece of information from the widely read account of events contained in Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days*. Schlesinger opened Chapter 10, entitled "The Bay of Pigs," with the statement that "On November 29, 1960, 12 days after he had heard about the Cuban project, the President-elect received from Allen Dulles a detailed briefing on CIA's new military conception. Kennedy listened with attention, then told Dulles to carry the work forward."³²

If this briefing occurred, it would be by far the most important in the series Kennedy received. This would place on the President-elect an earlier and more direct responsibility for the development of the operation than would otherwise be justified. In fact, however, the meeting with Kennedy on 29 November appears not to have occurred at all. Available CIA records contain no mention of such a briefing. Dulles's personal desk calendar shows that he had a full day, with 10 different appointments running from 9:00 a.m. to 5:45 p.m., none of which were with the President-elect. It would be most extraordinary if the Director's calendar or other CIA records failed to note a meeting of the DCI with the President-elect.

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Similarly, there is nothing in information available about Kennedy's activities to indicate that he met with Dulles that day. *The New York Times* of 30 November reported that "The Senator worked at home throughout the day [of 29 November] leaving only to visit his wife Jacqueline and son John F. Jr. in Georgetown University Hospital." The newspapers also reported that Kennedy had met at home that day with prospective Cabinet appointee Chester Bowles, and with Terry Sanford, the latter visiting to recommend Luther Hodges for a cabinet position. Other visitors to the Kennedy home in Georgetown included his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, Edward Foley of the Inaugural Committee, and Senator Dennis Chavez of New Mexico.³³

In thinking back on the briefings Kennedy received on the controversial Cuban operation, Ted Sorensen, his speechwriter and confidant, recalls, "President Kennedy did tell me, much later, that he had been briefed on the operation by the CIA while he was President-elect. CIA told him in some detail what they had in mind and why. That was the Palm Beach briefing." Sorensen doubted that Kennedy received a more detailed briefing by Dulles on 29 November, adding "I saw him every single day, and we discussed the whole range of policy matters—the foreign issues as well as 500 domestic ones."

Schlesinger was amused that he may have described a critical briefing that appears not to have occurred. In a letter to the author in 1993, he recommended that the original draft manuscript of his *A Thousand Days* be reviewed to ascertain whether the controversial assertion was footnoted. "If nothing turns up I must take Rick's way out," he wrote, referring to the character in "Casablanca" played by Humphrey Bogart. "Bogart: 'I came to Casablanca for the waters.' Claude Rains: 'What waters? We're in the desert.' Bogart: 'I was misinformed.'"³⁴

An important meeting concerning the Cuba operation in fact was held on 29 November at the White House at 11:00 a.m. with the President—Eisenhower—in the chair. The President-elect was not included. Schlesinger and other authors, writing a few years after the fact, had obviously learned that on that date "the President" was briefed on Cuba and, being oriented to President Kennedy, assumed that it was he who was involved. Indeed, the meeting of 29 November was an important one. On that date Eisenhower underscored that he wanted to continue active planning for the project. Eisenhower was pushing ahead vigorously; Kennedy was not yet responsible in any degree.

Soon after his inauguration on 28 January 1961, Kennedy did receive a full briefing on the planned Cuban operation. At that meeting the new President authorized the Agency to continue its preparations and asked that the paramilitary aspects of the plan be provided to the Joint Chiefs for their analysis. Even in late January, however,

Kennedy withheld specific approval for an invasion, with or without direct US involvement.

Kennedy Visits CIA

One unique aspect of Kennedy's familiarization with the CIA was the President-elect's decision to visit CIA Headquarters during the transition period. He was initially scheduled to visit the Agency's South Building, at 2430 E Street in downtown Washington, on 16 December. In preparation for the visit, Dulles asked Huntington Sheldon, the Director of Current Intelligence, to prepare a book for the DCI containing material he and senior Agency officials should use in discussions with Kennedy.

The ambitious agenda that was prepared for the visit envisaged presentations by the DCI and eight other senior officers.³⁵ Briefings were prepared on the Agency's mission, organization, and budget, and on the legal basis for its activities. Dulles and others would describe the Agency's relationship with the Congress the functions of such organizations as the Watch Committee and the President's Board of Consultants and the functions of the several agencies that comprised the Intelligence Community. The Assistant Director for National Estimates would describe the estimates process and brief one specific paper, a recently published "Estimate of the World Situation."

The chiefs of the Agency's key directorates were primed to explain their roles and activities. The Clandestine Service portion of the briefing

included a description of clandestine intelligence collection and the covert action functions. In the latter discussion, the chief of operations was to update "Cuban operations since the Palm Beach briefing."

Owing to scheduling difficulties, Kennedy was unable to visit the Agency on 16 December. The visit was delayed until after the inauguration and finally occurred on Thursday, 26 January 1961. Dulles's desk calendar notes that the briefings were to run from 2:40 p.m. to 4:10 p.m. In reality, they had to be abbreviated considerably, much to the consternation of the participants, because an unintended opportunity came to the President's attention.

For reasons having nothing to do with Kennedy's visit, the Agency, a few weeks before, had put together an attractive exhibit of materials relating to the history of intelligence that was located just inside the entrance of South Building. A number of exhibits were displayed under a sign that read, "These letters loaned courtesy of the Houghton Library of Harvard University." The newly elected Harvard man immediately noticed the reference to his alma mater. He stopped and read thoroughly the entire case of historical materials, much to the chagrin of Dulles and other waiting CIA executives.

Kennedy was already frustrated at press leaks from his new administration and therefore was especially taken with one of the letters in the display case. Written by General Washington to Colonel Elias Dayton in July 1777, that letter included the observation that "The necessity of

procuring good Intelligence is apparent and need not be further urged—all that remains for me to add is, that you keep the whole matter as secret as possible. For upon Secrecy, Success depends in Most Enterprises of the kind, and for want of it, they are generally defeated...." Kennedy asked Dulles if he could have a copy of the letter, which was sent promptly. The President wrote the CIA Director thanking him and the creator of the exhibit, Walter Pforzheimer, saying "The letter is both a fine memento of my visit with you and a continuing reminder of the role of intelligence in national policy."³⁶

The President's Intelligence Checklist

Within days of his election, President Kennedy sent word to the White House that he would like to receive daily briefings on the same material that was being furnished to President Eisenhower.³⁷ The request from Kennedy came by way of one of his assistants for transition matters, Washington attorney Clark Clifford. Eisenhower approved the passage of this material to Kennedy on 17 November, the eve of Dulles's trip to Florida. There is no record that Dulles discussed this matter with Kennedy the next day, however, and some weeks were to go by before there was any organized followup.

When Kennedy visited CIA Headquarters after his inauguration, Sheldon described the current intelligence products that were available to him. Kennedy reiterated that he wanted to read the publications and designated his military aide, Brig. Gen. Chester Clifton, who was

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present at the meeting, to receive the material. Clifton had taken over Goodpaster's role providing daily briefings to the new President, although Goodpaster continued to serve in the White House for a few weeks to help with the transition.

For the first few months of the Kennedy administration, Agency officers each morning would deliver CIA's *Current Intelligence Bulletin* to Clifton, sometimes highlighting the most important items and staying to answer any questions he had. Clifton would then take the material to the President, dutifully reporting back his questions or comments if there were any. Unfortunately, the intelligence report was part of a large package of material Kennedy received each day and was often not read. This left the new President less well informed than he thought he was, a situation that was soon driven home to him during his unfortunate encounter with Soviet Premier Khrushchev in Vienna.

From the start of the Kennedy administration, Dulles had few opportunities to present intelligence directly to the President. In large part this was because Kennedy did not hold regularly scheduled NSC meetings as Eisenhower and Truman had. In addition, however, there was a problem of personal chemistry and a generational gap between the new President and the CIA Director. Agency veterans at the time had the feeling that Dulles may have been patronizing to Kennedy in his early briefings and thus was not warmly welcomed to the White House.³⁸ Along the same lines, Sorensen remembers Kennedy “was not very impressed with Dulles's briefings. He

did not think they were in much depth or told him anything he could not read in the newspapers.” In these awkward circumstances, Dulles's practice was to prepare written memorandums for the President on items that he deemed to be of particular significance, delivering them personally when possible. He also made personal deliveries when he wanted to bring certain important NIEs to the President's attention.

The fiasco at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, reinforced by Kennedy's frustration with the meeting with Khrushchev in early June, changed everything. Clifton informed Sheldon that the President was reluctant to continue receiving intelligence in the normal way. Clifton suggested that the Agency would have to come up with some entirely different way of presenting its information if it were to regain the President's confidence. He volunteered that there was no point in the DCI discussing the matter directly with the President as that would be counterproductive. Dulles reacted to this unfortunate turn of events in a calm manner, conceivably foreseeing that the President's disappointment with the Agency would lead to his own removal.

In fact, in November 1961 Dulles was to be replaced by John McCone,

who served Kennedy as DCI for almost two years. In the early part of this period McCone succeeded in rebuilding the Agency's relationship with Kennedy. McCone saw Kennedy frequently, and the President—more than any other before or since—would telephone even lower level Agency officers for information or assistance. Interestingly, McCone's prescience in alerting the President to the possibility that the Soviets would place missiles in Cuba backfired for him personally. Although he was right when most others were wrong, the President did not like McCone's public references to this fact, and their relationship cooled noticeably.

Below the level of the DCI, the Agency in mid-1961 took pains to reestablish its relationship with the President. Sheldon and other managers of the Office of Current Intelligence—working with Clifton but without the knowledge of their superiors either at the white House or the Agency—undertook to create a new publication. The group came up with a format for a publication designed exclusively for the President that would be called the *President's Intelligence Checklist*. Longtime current intelligence specialist Richard Lehman worked up a dry run of the proposed *Checklist* which Sheldon took to Clifton for his perusal and approval. Clifton was pleased with the document, in part because it contained no classification restrictions, and the items presented were short and snappy.

The first issue of the new publication was published on Saturday, 17 June. It was delivered to Clifton, who took it to the President at his country

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home near Middleburg, Virginia. The first *Checklist* was a small book of seven pages, measuring 8 1/2 by 8 inches, that contained 14 items of two sentences each with a half-dozen longer notes and a few maps. Agency managers spent a nervous weekend; they were immensely relieved the following Monday morning, to hear Clifton's "go ahead—so far, so good."

It quickly became clear that the President was reading the *Checklist* and issuing instructions to various officials based on what he was reading. The President not infrequently asked to see source materials, estimates bearing on items that attracted his attention, texts of speeches by foreign leaders, and occasional Agency publications providing additional details and explanations. Within a few months, the Secretaries of State and Defense asked to see what the President was reading. In December, six months after publication had begun, Clifton passed the word to the Agency that those two Cabinet members should be added to the subscriber list.

Although an Agency officer did not sit with the President while he read the *Checklist*, Clifton was careful to pass back to the Agency the President's reactions and questions. CIA officials regarded the new system as the best channel the Agency had ever had to a President. In particular, the relationship with Kennedy was judged to be a distinct improvement over the more formal relationship with Eisenhower.

Editors of the *Checklist* were especially heartened in September 1963, when Clifton passed the word that the President was delighted with the

book. The following month Clifton shared with his Agency contacts a comment made by Secretary Rusk that he found the *Checklist* "a damned useful document." On one memorable occasion in October 1963, Clifton, Bundy, and the Agency's briefing officer were huddled in the basement of the West Wing going over the *Checklist* when President Kennedy called down asking where they were and when they were going to bring it to him.

The *Checklist* was published daily for two and one-half years. Clearly, it captured the attention and served the interests of the President. Ironically, the publication, created to respond to the President's deep disillusionment with CIA, would prove to be the forerunner of the President's *Daily Brief*, the publication that has now served successive presidents for 33 years.

This article is ~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

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NOTES

1. *The New York Times*, 8 October 1960, p. 10.
2. *The New York Times*, 14 October 1960, p. 21.
3. *Ibid.*, 22 October 1960, pp. 8, 9.

4. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; 1965), p. 225.

5. Richard Goodwin, *Remembering America*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.; 1988; p. 125.

6. *The New York Times*, 23 October 1960, p. E10.

7. Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap; 1978; p. 220.

8. *The New York Times*, 22 October 1960, p. 9.

9. Theodore Sorensen, telephone interview with the author, 19 May 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Sorensen's comments come from this interview.

10. Goodwin, *Remembering America*, p. 125.

11. Knight McMahan, interview by the author in Hanover, NH, 18 April 1993.

12. Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*. New York: Doubleday and Co.; 1962; p. 354.

13. Dwight Eisenhower, in comments recorded by Allen Dulles, Memorandum for the President, 9 July 1960.

14. Dwight Eisenhower telegrams to John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, 1960, p. 582.

15. Allen Dulles, Memorandum for the President, 3 August 1960.

16. Allen Dulles, Memorandum for the Record, 21 September 1960.

17. CIA, untitled list of significant developments in response to Kennedy's request; no date.

CONFIDENTIAL

Kennedy

18. CIA, "Draft Cuban Operational Briefing: President-Elect," 15 November 1960.
19. Allen Dulles, Memorandum for Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, 25 September 1960.
20. Andrew Goodpaster, interview by the author in Washington, DC, 26 September 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Goodpaster's observations come from this interview.
21. Special National Intelligence Estimate No. 11-10-57, "The Soviet ICBM Program - Conclusions," 10 December 1957, pp. 1, 2.
22. National Intelligence Estimate No. 11-8-59, "Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Attack through Mid-1964," 9 February 1960, p. 2.
23. National Intelligence Estimate No. 11-4-59, "Main Trends in Soviet Capabilities and Policies, 1959-1964," 9 February 1960, p. 4.
24. Howard Stoertz, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 27 September 1993.
25. Gerald Ford, interview by the author in Beaver Creek, Colorado, 8 September 1993.
26. Richard Bissell, interview by the author in Farmington, Connecticut, 17 April 1993.
27. Allen Dulles, Memorandum for Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, 1 June 1961.
28. Allen Dulles, "My Answer on the Bay of Pigs," unpublished draft, October 1965.
29. Lyman Kirkpatrick, Diary, 10 November 1960.
30. Richard Bissell, untitled and undated notes for briefing President-elect Kennedy.
31. Andrew Goodpaster, Memorandum for the Record, 17 November 1960.
32. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 233.
33. *The New York Times*, 30 November 1960, pp. 1, 30.
34. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., letter to the author, 23 June 1993.
35. CIA, "Agenda for President-elect," 16 December 1960.
36. John Kennedy letter to Allen Dulles, 10 February 1961.
37. Goodpaster, Memorandum for Record, 17 November 1960.
38. Richard Lehman, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 10 March 1993.